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High-level meeting

Main and emerging issues**Report of the Secretary-General****Contents**

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I. Introduction

1. Almost a year has passed since the General Assembly, at its nineteenth special session, reviewed progress achieved in five years since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). The assessment carried out by the Assembly clearly showed that in spite of a number of noticeable results in the implementation of Agenda 21 and the principles of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development at the local, national and international levels, much more remains to be done and greater political will must be mobilized in order to expedite progress towards shifting the path of world development to a more sustainable trajectory.

2. The special session was originally foreseen as a review meeting. However, in adopting the final document of the special session – the Programme for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21 – the General Assembly did not limit itself to a mere assessment of the progress achieved and to a reconfirmation of commitments already made at UNCED. The Assembly advanced international understanding of a number of key issues on the sustainable development agenda, and adopted a number of important practical decisions and concrete recommendations for expediting progress in these areas.

3. The situation prior to the sixth session of the Commission on Sustainable Development provides more solid ground for optimism. Positive results were achieved and concrete commitments were made at the third meeting of the Conference of Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (Kyoto, Japan, 1-10 December 1997). The Commission's Intergovernmental Forum on Forests has been established and preparations are well under way for its first substantive meeting. Several Governments – of both developed and developing countries – have organized important meetings, including at a high political level, to provide inputs to the deliberations in the Commission. The number of local Agenda 21 initiatives continues to grow. Sustainable development issues are more frequently discussed in various national, regional and international forums. Greater attention to sustainable development has been demonstrated by parliaments and legislative assemblies. Continued support for – and high expectations in connection with – the work of the Commission on Sustainable Development are evident on the part of Governments, international organizations within and outside the United Nations system, and major groups. A stronger commitment to sustainable development and interest in the work of the Commission is being demonstrated by the private sector. The ongoing reform of

the United Nations is expected to enable its Secretariat to provide more consistent and more effective support to sustainable development work at the global and country levels, and to build stronger partnerships with all the actors involved. For example, as the result of the integration of the normative, analytical and technical cooperation functions of the Secretariat, policy development work at Headquarters and country-level activities are expected to mutually enrich each other.

4. The two inter-sessional working groups of the Commission, which met earlier in 1998, concluded with constructive practical results and identified a number of key issues for further consideration by the Commission. The challenge for the sixth session of the Commission is to achieve tangible results, secure further commitment to action, and advance dialogue and understanding – both among Governments and between Governments and other partners – on the issues placed on its agenda.

5. As a result of the nineteenth special session of the General Assembly, the new programme of work of the Commission for the 1998-2002 period is better focused on strategic sustainable development issues, and provides for a more integrated consideration of the economic, social and environmental components of sustainable development in critical areas. While focusing on a limited number of issues included on the agenda of a given session, the new programme also facilitates early preparations for policy discussions on issues that are scheduled to take place at forthcoming sessions.

II. Main challenges for the sixth session of the Commission

6. The participants in the high-level meeting are invited to focus their attention on the issues on the agenda of the sixth session of the Commission on Sustainable Development set out below.

Strategic approaches to freshwater management

7. There is compelling evidence that the mismanagement of water resources could become a limiting factor to sustainable development in many parts of the world. An expert group meeting on strategic approaches to freshwater management (Harare, 27-30 January 1998), an international forum on the theme "Global water politics: cooperation for

transboundary water management" (Petersburg/Bonn, Germany, 3-5 March 1998) and an international conference on water and sustainable development (Paris, 19-21 March 1998) all stressed the need for an integrated approach to the management, development and equitable use of freshwater resource if a series of crises, potentially with regional and even global implications, are to be averted.

8. The ministerial declaration of the Paris conference called upon the international community to develop an agreed statement of principles to be applied in developing and implementing local and national water management systems and international cooperation to support them, taking into consideration the outcome of the Harare expert group meeting. The declaration also emphasized the importance of following up the guidance contained in the conference's programme of priority action.

9. Based on the outcome of the above-mentioned forums, actions towards the integrated management of water resources need to be based on the following considerations:

(a) The need to recognize the river basin and aquifer systems as the spatial units of management. With regard to international watercourses, the Petersburg/Bonn forum concluded that a common understanding of cooperative management or a "shared vision" is critical for the effective management of international water resources;

(b) The conservation of freshwater and related ecosystems is vital to sustainable development. There is a need to promote an ecosystem approach in integrated water resources planning, development and management within the framework of river basin and aquifer systems;

(c) The effective assessment and management of water resources, including the prevention and mitigation of water-related disasters, requires adequate physical and socio-economic information flows. High priority needs to be given to the strengthening or establishment of local, national or international integrated water information systems;

(d) In view of the vital role of water, a finite and vulnerable resource, in connection with the satisfaction of basic human needs, food security, poverty alleviation and the functioning of ecosystems, water planning and management needs to be integrated into national economic management;

(e) High priority needs to be given to the strengthening of institutions and improving training and awareness of managers and users alike. There is a need

to ensure the implementation of a participatory approach to water management in which women have an equal role. The role of Governments needs to be clearly defined with regard to policy formulation and regulatory measures on the one hand, and the direct management and provision of services on the other. The establishment of an enabling environment needs to be promoted in order to facilitate partnerships between public, private and community organizations, local authorities and non-governmental organizations;

(f) Increased financial resources will need to be mobilized for the sustainable development of freshwater resources. All costs must be recovered if the provision of water is to be viable. Subsidies for specific groups may be judged desirable within some countries. Due consideration needs to be given to enhancing private sector involvement. Governments and the international community need to strengthen consultation mechanisms for improving donor/recipient dialogues for the mobilization of financial resources in a well targeted and predictable manner.

Industry and sustainable development

10. Industry has a key role to play in achieving progress in all three objectives of sustainable development: creating economic growth, furthering social development and protecting the environment. A sustainable industry policy requires that these three dimensions be addressed within an integrated framework emphasizing a preventive approach. Today, Governments are seeking to develop policy packages that combine the traditional command-and-control measures with economic instruments and voluntary initiatives. Furthermore, such policy packages are most effective if developed in cooperation with key social groups. Industry, in turn, is expanding its actions based on corporate responsibility to cover the economic, social and environmental arenas. This involves an increasing use of tools for analysis and evaluation (life cycle analysis, environmental accounting, social auditing and indicators), guiding action (environmental management systems, eco-design, cleaner production and training) and communicating (social and environmental reporting). In this process, industry has increased its commitment to dialogue and cooperation with Governments, employees and other social groups.

11. The participants in the high-level meeting may wish to consider how to:

(a) Further reform industrial policy, devise more appropriate regulatory systems and create a policy environment conducive to foreign direct investment that is supportive of sustainable development;

(b) Accelerate the development and dissemination of environmentally sound technologies through investment in infrastructure, education and training, and the creation of business/academic/government partnerships to strengthen domestic technological capabilities;

(c) Promote the development of voluntary industry initiatives, the reporting of quantitative targets set by the enterprises themselves and self-evaluation with respect to their achievements;

(d) Improve the monitoring of the environmental performance of industry by Government and develop national performance indicators, in particular where trade liberalization leads to rapid expansion of concentrated industrial production;

(e) Foster greater cooperation between Government, industry, trade unions and civil society in order to ensure the sustainability of social security arrangements, enhance social safety networks for those who are adversely affected by economic change and increase efforts to ensure universal compliance by industry with core labour standards.

Guidelines for consumer protection

12. National consumer policies provide an important but largely undeveloped tool for promoting sustainable consumption patterns and sustainable development. Consumers can make a major contribution to sustainable development provided that they have access to accurate information on the environmental impact of their consumption of goods and services, and choices of goods and services that are not environmentally harmful. Consumer policies can promote general consumer education concerning sustainable consumption, product information relating to sustainable production and consumption, protection against misleading environmental claims, economic incentives towards more sustainable consumption, and development planning that facilitates sustainable transportation, housing and energy and water consumption. Such policies should be developed and implemented by Governments, in cooperation with business, consumer organizations and other concerned groups, and supported by international cooperation.

13. The participants in the high-level meeting may wish to consider priority issues for consumer policies to promote sustainable consumption, and how the Commission could best proceed to extend the guidelines on consumer protection to include issues of sustainable consumption, taking into account the proposed guidelines for sustainable consumption developed at the Interregional Expert Group Meeting on Consumer Protection and Sustainable Consumption (São Paulo, Brazil, 28-30 January 1998) (see E/CN.17/1998/5, annex).

Transfer of technology

14. Increased transfer of environmentally sound technologies from developed to developing countries is essential for sustainable development on a global basis. Such technology transfer should be based on partnerships between Governments, business, research and development institutions, and international organizations. Although Governments should establish policies and provide financial incentives and support for the transfer of environmentally sound technologies, business is generally best able to transfer the practical know-how, including management systems, product design and marketing, and equipment, for using new technologies in commercial production. Governments can promote and support the transfer of commercial technologies through private direct investment, private and public joint ventures, co-production and supply arrangements, licensing arrangements, and management and consultant services. Government support is particularly important in assisting small and medium-sized enterprises in making connections and arrangements for technology transfer.

15. The most effective technology transfer requires adaptation of the technology to local conditions and priorities, further development of the technology to adapt to changing conditions and markets, and ultimately, participation in the development of new technologies. Technology cooperation projects involving research and development institutions and commercial enterprises in developed and developing countries can generate new technologies designed for production in developing countries for both national needs and export markets. In most developing countries, this will require the strengthening of capacities for research and development and for adapting and managing new technologies. Since much basic research and development in both developed and developing countries is publicly funded, Governments have a particularly important role in promoting the development of new environmentally

sound technologies to meet the needs of both developing and developed countries. Small and medium-sized enterprises and research and development institutions particularly need support from Governments and international organizations in establishing international technology cooperation arrangements.

16. The participants in the high-level meeting may wish to consider how Governments and international organizations can best promote and support the transfer of environmentally sound technology – especially when developed with public funds – and technology cooperation, in partnership with business and research and development institutions, and how they can best assist small and medium-sized enterprises in participating in such arrangements.

Capacity-building

17. The national capacity-building process can be most effective when it is driven by political commitment and a sense of ownership. Increased international cooperation and funding are needed to support and facilitate such national efforts. Countries can learn from each other's experiences by exchanging information, sharing case studies and enhancing networking. Capacity-building is increasingly becoming an integral part of subregional cooperation programmes, and such trends need to be further promoted.

18. The participants in the high-level meeting may wish to consider ways in which positive developments in national capacity-building processes could be further promoted and how international support in this regard could be better orchestrated.

Education

19. Education is an integral part of the enabling framework for sustainable development. Education can be a driving force for changing values and mindsets, and can lead to behavioural changes towards more sustainable lifestyles. The concept of education for sustainable development needs to be widely understood as encompassing all disciplines, engaging all levels and modes of teaching and learning. The important next step would be to define required actions to be taken at the local, national and regional levels so as to reorient education towards sustainable development. These also need to be reflected in overall sustainable development strategies at those levels.

20. In this regard, the Commission work programme on education, training and public awareness, which was adopted in 1996 and is expected to be further discussed and elaborated at the present session, has a special significance. The participants in the high-level meeting may wish to consider ensuring that the work programme be used to serve as a basic framework for action at all levels using all channels, and for partnerships among all actors concerned.

Science

21. The best scientific advisory processes seem to be those that combine scientific excellence and intellectual independence with a close dialogue and cooperation with policy makers and practitioners. There is a greater need to orient scientific research to become more action-oriented and interdisciplinary, and to build up scientific capacities at the national level through strengthening science education at all levels and mobilizing increased investment in research and development targeted to priority scientific themes of sustainable development. One important action to that end is the organization by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization of the high-level World Conference on Science in June 1999.

22. The participants in the high-level meeting may wish to consider how the Commission might best contribute to the successful convening of the World Conference on Science and provide political impetus to the more effective mobilization of science for sustainable development.

III. Launching preparations for the seventh session of the Commission

Protection of oceans and seas

23. It is expected that the discussion at the seventh session of the Commission on Sustainable Development will focus on implementation of the goals and objectives contained in chapter 17 of Agenda 21, as well as of more recent international initiatives, such as the Global Programme of Action for the Protection of the Marine Environment from Land-based Activities. The focus on oceans and seas in 1999 could provide an appropriate follow-up to the Commission's decision 4/15 of 1996, in which, *inter alia*, the Commission called for a periodic overall review by the Commission of all aspects of the marine environment and its related issues,

as described in chapter 17 of Agenda 21, for which the overall legal framework is provided by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

24. The seventh session of the Commission will also offer a timely opportunity to review and take stock of several relevant activities taking place in 1998 in the context of the International Year of the Ocean, as well as the world exposition at Lisbon on the theme "The oceans, a heritage for the future". Moreover, the Independent World Commission on the Oceans will conclude its work in August 1998, thus providing a useful basis for the Commission to develop recommendations for priority actions.

Sustainable tourism

25. Tourism, both national and international, is a very large and growing economic sector, with important environmental and social as well as economic impacts. In some small island developing countries, tourism generates over half the gross national product. With its labour-intensive services, tourism can generate substantial employment and revenues in areas with tourist attractions; however, large numbers of tourists can cause severe environmental stress due to water consumption and pollution, waste generation and construction activities. Excessive stress in environmentally fragile areas, including coastal zones, mountain areas and wildlife habitats, can threaten ecosystems and biodiversity and even undermine the tourist business itself. Large-scale tourism, which is often seasonal and sometimes volatile, can also disrupt local social structures and cultural practices and values. On the other hand, with careful management, tourism can promote sustainable development.

26. The participants in the high-level meeting may wish to consider priorities for national policies and international cooperation relating to tourism for discussion at the seventh session of the Commission. Participants may also wish to consider how the views of various stakeholders, possibly including the travel industry, environmental groups, public agencies concerned with eco-tourism and communities in tourist areas, could be brought into the discussion.

Changing consumption and production patterns

27. Long-term sustainable development for all countries will require both cleaner and more resource-efficient

production technologies, as well as changes in consumption patterns, particularly in the industrialized countries. Changing consumer behaviour and lifestyles with respect to transportation, housing, household appliances, energy and water use, waste handling and other factors will be a slow and complex process. Public policies should promote increased public understanding of sustainable development, create economic incentives for sustainable consumption, and develop public infrastructure, land-use planning and social services that promote sustainable consumption. Governments should work together with business, educators, community organizations and other organizations of civil society in promoting sustainable consumption.

28. Production patterns should be made more sustainable through economic incentives, government regulations and voluntary business practices. Governments should cooperate with business in encouraging industrial environmental management systems and publication of information on the environmental impacts of goods and services, where possible based on assessment of production processes, distribution, use and disposal. Particular attention should be paid to improving the energy and resource efficiency of production processes. Efforts should be made to ensure that changes in production and consumption patterns in the industrialized countries do not present obstacles to sustainable development in developing countries.

29. The participants in the high-level meeting may wish to consider priorities for changing consumption and production patterns, and to examine how Governments in developed and developing countries can cooperate with business, consumer organizations and other organizations of civil society in changing consumption patterns.

Preparations for the deliberations on energy in 2001

30. At its nineteenth special session, the General Assembly decided that the preparations for the Commission's deliberations in 2001 on the issue of energy within the context of sustainable development should be initiated at the seventh session of the Commission, in 1999, and should utilize an open-ended intergovernmental group of experts to be held in conjunction with inter-sessional meetings of the eighth (2000) and ninth (2001) sessions of the Commission. It is important to ensure that that forthcoming intergovernmental process provides an opportunity to elaborate strategic approaches to the sustainable

development energy agenda that would cover all types of energy and address all aspects of the contemporary energy discussion – economic, social and environmental.

31. The participants in the high-level meeting may wish to voice their expectations in connection with this matter and address possible modalities of the intergovernmental process to be launched at the seventh session of the Commission. This will, *inter alia*, facilitate and give further guidance to the preparatory work for the 1999 deliberations in the Commission that has already started in the United Nations system under the aegis of the Inter-Agency Committee on Sustainable Development.

Sustainable development of small island developing States

32. At its seventh session, the Commission will serve, *inter alia*, as the preparatory body for the two-day special session of the General Assembly that will meet immediately preceding the opening of the fifty-fourth regular session of the Assembly in order to carry out a five-year comprehensive review of progress achieved in the implementation of the Global Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States. The participants in the high-level meeting may wish to give further guidance to the preparatory work for the review that is currently under way.

IV. Regional cooperation and exchange of information

33. At its nineteenth special session, the General Assembly called upon the Commission on Sustainable Development to promote increased regional implementation of Agenda 21 in cooperation with relevant regional and subregional organizations and the regional commissions, and recommended that the Commission take into account regional developments related to the implementation of the outcomes of UNCED.

34. The Commission has an important role to play in promoting a thematic focus, catalysing linkages between key institutions at the national and regional levels and responding to priorities through consultations with interested regional organizations and agencies. Regional and subregional cooperation and information exchanges could be enhanced through increased opportunities for dialogue, interaction and networking among the regional and

subregional entities concerned, both within and outside the United Nations system.

35. The General Assembly also recommended that the Commission provide a forum for the exchange of experience on regional and subregional initiatives and regional collaboration for sustainable development.

36. Since its first session, the Commission has regularly provided a forum for the exchange of national information, both through national presentations given by member States during the sessions of the Commission and its inter-sessional meetings and through voluntary national reporting on the implementation of Agenda 21, specifically as it relates to the agenda of each session of the Commission.

37. Regional exchange of national information would provide a third means of sharing experience and best practices in the implementation of Agenda 21. A particular challenge would be to add value to national information through regional and subregional analysis and exchange, thereby contributing to the work of the Commission on Sustainable Development on monitoring implementation of Agenda 21 and evaluating the effectiveness of national and regional policies for achieving sustainable development objectives.

38. The participants in the high-level meeting may wish to consider how the role of the Commission as a platform for the exchange of regional and subregional experiences can be realized. It may also wish to support the proposal of the Economic Commission for Europe to undertake a pilot project to test modalities for the regional exchange of national information in support of the agenda of the Commission in the context of regional priorities.

V. Stronger partnerships with major groups

39. The participatory spirit of Agenda 21, captured under the concept of major groups, continues to be a strength of the Commission on Sustainable Development. However, there is still a need to support and enhance the role and contributions of major groups in sustainable development if the participatory intent of Agenda 21 is to be fully realized. Urgent needs in this area include formalizing some of the participatory traditions established by the Commission and exploring ways to increase participation by major groups from developing countries. In this context, the participants in the high-level meeting may wish to consider and provide their guidance on the following:

(a) **Ways and means of strengthening inter-sessional mechanisms for the participation of and consultation with major groups in the context of the Commission's work programme.** Such mechanisms could generate additional ideas and facilitate formal consideration of major group views during the sessions of the Commission and its inter-sessional working groups. They could also increase the demand on the part of major groups to engage in national and regional consultations on the issues included on the Commission's annual agendas and develop better coordinated responses;

(b) **Ensuring participation of key actors from the major groups in the "economic sector" discussions in the Commission throughout the 1999-2001 period, building upon the experience gained in the industry segment during the sixth session of the Commission;**

(c) **Utilizing better the "Day of ..." format, such as the Day of Women organized for 1998, as a way to encourage participation by a particular major group sector, and linking their concerns with the Commission's agenda in a given year.** A series of "Day of ..." events established and recognized in advance would help to mobilize the relevant major group sectors and enable greater participation. A Day of Indigenous People is already on the Commission agenda for 2000. Other Commission sessions could include a Day of Farmers in 1999 (in preparation for the sustainable agriculture focus the following year) and a Day of Non-Governmental Organizations in 2001 (which could be a useful follow-up to the suggested people's millennium assembly). The 10-year review of Agenda 21 implementation in 2002 could include a series of dialogue sessions or a similar set of consultative processes with all major groups;

(d) **Explore the feasibility and desirability of creating special funding arrangements with the aim of increasing the participation of major group organizations from developing countries.** At present, even with the tremendous effort of some large developed country non-governmental organizations, there is a significant gap in the numbers of major group participants from developing and developed countries. Participation in the work of the Commission is an excellent way to link local efforts with global objectives, and helps to mobilize entire communities once their representatives are able to take part in the dynamics of the Commission process.

VI. Conclusion

40. The participants in the high-level meeting are also encouraged to announce their intentions regarding any possible initiatives and inter-sessional activities that they plan to organize in the context of follow-up work to issues on the agenda of the sixth session of the Commission, as well as for an input to future sessions of the Commission.